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# BEAUTY AND THE BEAST: 20TH CENTURY ROMANCE?

Maryellen Hains

In the traditional retellings of *Beauty and the Beast*, the main motifs and themes include: self-sacrifice as Beauty agrees to take her father's place fully expecting to be devoured by the Beast; a talisman or magic object that bridges the real and enchanted worlds; the captivity and isolation of Beauty in the Beast's palace or compound; the bargain between Beauty and the Beast with the power in the hands of the Beast; kindness and love are more important than wealth, wit or good looks; Beauty's purity and love (bride test) transforms the Beast into the Prince. There have been several 20th century literary versions of the tale that closely follow the original, but they divide into two categories: those set in a magical reality, dwelling on the opulence of the palace, and focusing on the Beast's physical transformation; and those set in the modern world, keeping the original pattern of motifs, but inserting contemporary values, and focusing on the Beast's emotional transformation.

## *A Magic Realm*

Jean Cocteau's 1946 *Beauty and the Beast* film is a classic in its own right. Cocteau builds upon the romantic elements of the original tale and adds a rich visual and aural texture to the film. The leonine Beast is a medieval gentleman clad in silks and velvets. He is tortured by the violent beastiality of his nature and tries to shield Beauty from seeing him with blood on his hands. Most often, he is princely in his demeanor and generous in his gifts to Beauty. His enchanted domain is Diana's kingdom, filled with animal elements – images on chairs and Beauty's bed, statues in the courtyard and on the battlements, deer and wild creatures in the forest. However, the animal nature of mankind is not limited to the Beast, but is also reflected by Cocteau in playful parallels between honking geese and the strutting posture of Beauty's haughty sisters or in the mirror's literal reflection of one of the sisters as a monkey.

This magical reality created by Cocteau includes Beauty's tears at her father's bedside turning into diamonds, and her bejeweled necklace turning into weeds when she tries to give it to her sister. In each case, the object is caught up in the emotion and motivation of the giver. Beauty's tears flow from her love and concern for her father. Her sisters' tears later in the tale, brought on by rubbing onions on their eyes, bring no such gifts. Beauty's necklace was a present from the Beast at a time when

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he was trying to keep his bestial emotions in rein. He directed his energy to conjuring up this courtly and dignified gift. It was meant only for Beauty and cannot be worn by anyone else.

Cocteau fills his film with magic objects and magical images—candelabra of human arms that light as the hall is entered, statues that monitor Beauty's every move, sunlight and shadows that predict and foreshadow. Among the most romantic of these elements are the Beast's five magic objects (extensions of elements found in the original tale): the rose, his horse, the glove, the mirror, and the key.

Cocteau's Beast freely gives Beauty those things he holds most precious, and in the end he is rewarded as she does return and declare her love and fidelity. Her mercenary sisters, her brother, and her real world boyfriend, Avenant, are not rewarded for their cold hearts and their greed. Avenant's violation of Diana's pavilion at the Beast's palace leads to his downfall. As the film closes his avariciousness has literally transformed him into a Beast.

Robin McKinley's 1978 novelization of the tale for young adult readers, *Beauty*, is also characterized by an emphasis on the magical reality. While Cocteau's retelling is folktale-like in its nature (flat characters, predictable outcomes, etc.), McKinley has done a literary transformation. In the novel, we get to know all the members of Beauty's family and the question of HONOR becomes more complex. The spell that the Beast is under is part of a magic that reaches beyond his complex. The forest becomes the enchanted threshold. Magic permeates the tale and McKinley builds on some of Mme. Leprince de Beaumont's details. Here the library in the Beast's castle contains not only every book ever written, but every book that ever will be written. The meals are served by invisible hands, but as Beauty leaves more of her skepticism behind and believes in the magic, she can hear the voices of the maids in her chamber; she can "see" the shadows of the enchantment skitter across the grounds.

McKinley tells the story in a first person narration from Beauty's point of view. Beauty, Honor by birth, sees her name as a misnomer. Her sisters, Grace and Hope, are more beautiful by physical standards. Part of this retelling is a maturation story. Beauty's growing self-confidence is tied to her growing confidence in the Beast's world. She issues invitations to the birds to return to his realm and chases the shadows from the land. While his compound is not a wasteland, she does remove elements of the enchantment and bring it further to life.

The Beast in this tale is formidable, but he is not beastly. The callousness that led to his enchantment has been tempered by two hundred years of solitude. While he imprisons Beauty in his compound, he offers no physical threat and he is always the gentleman. He needs Beauty's acceptance of his proposal to



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break the spell but not to change his nature. He is intelligent, generous, and steadfast.

These traditionally set retellings keep much of the flavor and intent of the original tale. Cocteau and McKinley have created Beautys with old fashioned values, strong family ties, and intellect, courage, and class. Their Beasts are romantic heroes, misunderstood at first glance, but with qualities to admire and respect. Themes of self-sacrifice, tolerance for individual difference, respect for kindness and generosity of spirit still seem appropriate. The magic worlds they describe are an inviting escape from the everyday life, and the seemingly innocent fantasy still appeals.

*The Contemporary World*

In the 1980's there has been an explosion in the contemporary category romance genre. Harlequin publishers have been joined by other paperback companies such as Dell (Candlelight), Bantam (Loveswept) and Silhouette in producing multiple titles in multiple series. More than sixty new books are introduced each month.

While the trend is away from gothic and historical romances, one of the recurring patterns is an homage to *Beauty and the Beast*. Here the stories veer away from the magical realities of Cocteau and McKinley. The setting is 1980's America. Beauty is a well educated, accomplished career woman with a strong commitment to honor and fairplay. The Beast is austere but usually not physically repulsive. Rather he is a beast of the modern world—powerful, amoral in his business dealings, holding something Beauty holds dear as hostage. A bargain between Beauty and the Beast is necessary to free the Beast's captive and Beauty takes its place. For a time, Beauty is physically held captive by the Beast. She roams freely within the bounds of his complex until finally her innocence, honor and love transform the Beast into a prince—a powerful, wealthy man of conscience, and as with the traditional tale, there is usually an element (flowers, animals, children) used to reflect Beauty's innate innocence.

Jayne Castle, winner of many awards as a romance writer, often uses elements of this tale in her novels. In her 1981 *Bargain with the Devil*, Stacy Rylan (Beauty) makes a bargain with Hunter Manning to save her family from being devoured by the Beast. Fourteen years earlier Hunter's father had been ruined by Stacy's father, a ruthless, self- centered businessman. Now Hunter wants revenge, and he chooses Stacy's newly married, vain sister-in-law as a target. If he can cause the marriage to falter, he will distract Stacy's brother from the business, and it will fail. Hunter will have his revenge on Rylan senior who will be informed only after it is too late, and he will

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see his family honor and business destroyed. Hunter doesn't know of Stacy's existence, but when she learns of his plan, she offers Hunter an alternative—herself. Stacy is protective of her brother who is not perceptive enough in his personal or business relationships to withstand Hunter's test, and she feels a strong family loyalty, even though her parents turned from her when she wouldn't allow her father to manipulate her life for his business ends. Ironically, she allows Hunter to do just that.

To save the family, Beauty must marry the Beast. Hunter wants the spark and integrity he sees in Stacy to be committed to him: "Your loyalty will belong to *me*; to the Manning family, or what there is left of it! Not the Rylans!" (33). With the bottom line clear she agrees: " 'The knowledge that my father thinks you've deliberately 'stolen' me away from the family will be sufficient to fulfill your desire for revenge? ... 'Very well,' Stacy said, drawing a deep steadying breath and refusing to lower her eyes. 'I'll marry you' " (35).

While *Bargain with the Devil* does not have Beauty held captive in an alternative location, Stacy is bound by the marriage agreement. She is bodily moved to Hunter's home, and her friendships are monitored. However, she is permitted to continue in her business, a nursery, and among her possessions are truck loads of personal plants and a greenhouse full of orchids. Stacy is like the flowers she loves and wears on her clothes, and within the growing relationship with Hunter Manning, she blossoms. Hunter, too, begins to change. Both characters are strongly bound by their word, and an increasing atmosphere of trust is built. Hunter finds he needs some of the warmth Stacy offers. Stacy is drawn to the passion Hunter unleashes in her. For Jayne Castle, TRUST is the major factor in any relationship of commitment. Hunter feels the bargain is completed when Stacy faces her father:

> "If you checked that thoroughly," Stacy interrupted with great assurance, "then you must know my husband is a man of his word. I have his promise that I am payment in full for what you did to his father."
>
> "You believe that? You don't think he has ulterior motives for gaining Eric's confidence and for winning over your mother?" Paul asked with faintly amused scorn.
>
> "I worried about it at first, the same way I worried when he told me he wanted a child ..." Her father's face tightened, and she knew he had just realized the full potential of the marriage for revenge. Stacy was now painfully aware of Hunter's eyes on her profile. She drew a deep breath and continued. "But I have his word that he would love his child, and that means he would never use her as a weapon. I also have my husband's word that he made friends with Eric because he happens to like him. It's as simple as that." She felt Hunter stiffen but did not turn to glance at him.



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"You believe all this?" her father asked again.
"Yes," Stacy said simply. "I believe it." (204)

Hunter then releases Stacy from her word. She is free to leave him, but by now she has fallen in love with him, and he is in love with her. The marriage has become a lifetime commitment and has humanized the beast.

In Iris Johansen's *The Lady and the Unicorn*, the stakes of the bargain are not family security, but rather the endangered species of the world. Janna Cannon is a zoologist who scales the walls of Rafe Santine's private estate in Carmel to get an audience with him. She wants him to donate a parcel of land as a wild life reserve. The current refuge's lease is up, and the animals will have to be captured and caged if she cannot find an alternative space. Rafe agrees to deed over the two million dollar plot of land in trade for caging Janna:

> ... "Shall we clarify the proposition? You agree to stay with me until I return to San Francisco, in any capacity that I require of you. In return, I'll deed the property over to the wildlife reserve immediately, with a cancellation option that I can exercise any time in the next two months if you prove unsatisfactory." (24-25)

She cannot leave the compound even to get her clothes. His one concession is that she can call her ailing grandmother every three days. Janna's grandmother is a full blooded Cherokee, and Janna has inherited an innate understanding of animals from her. Janna gentles the guard dogs that were loosed when she entered the estate, she empathizes with the wild animals who are her charges, and she begins to "tame" Rafe Santine. While she describes him as having the roar of a lion, "the bad temper of a rhinoceros and the callous toughness of an elephant" (127), he comes to think of himself as the unicorn:

> ... "The unicorn was a mythical animal who had that same strength and indomitability, yet the hunters who pursued him for his golden horn found he had one fatal weakness. They had only to set a young virgin in a forest clearing and the unicorn would be drawn to her as if by magic, and would kneel and place his head in her lap." He lifted his eyes to meet her own with an intensity that pierced the sensual haze that he was creating with the magic movement of his hands. "Then the hunters could fall upon him and bind him with their golden ropes and use him as they would. The legend never says what happened to the maiden. Presumably she strolled away as cool and uncaring as before she enticed him into her spell." His smile was bittersweet and caused a queer ache to tighten in her throat. "Do you recognize the parallels, lovely maiden?"

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> Without taking his eyes from her face, he deliberately lowered his head and placed it on the softness of her belly, the thick, anthracite darkness of his crisp hair nestling back and forth upon her satin smoothness like the sensual creature of his story. "Will you take your unicorn home, or turn him over to the hunters and walk away, Janna?" (136)

Beauty is beginning to tame the Beast even as he fights the feelings he is beginning to have for Janna. He feels his emotions as the "golden ropes" and strikes out to preserve his autonomy, all the while trying to possess her more and more.

Perhaps the most blatant use of the *Beauty and the Beast* story in contemporary romance is Debbie Macomber's *Some Kind of Wonderful*, one of her "Legendary Lovers" trilogy published in 1988. The first book, *Cindy and the Prince*, is the tale of a charwoman and her boss Thorndike Prince, an updated *Cinderella* story. *Almost Paradise*, book two, tells of Sherry White and her seven charges at a summer camp for intellectually gifted children. Her prince charming is the camp director and founder.

In *Some Kind of Wonderful*, Judy Lovin agrees to become a prisoner on John McFarland's island to save her father's business from a hostile takeover. As in the original tale, Beauty's father objects to her self-sacrifice and mourns his loss. The Beast is once again a bored businessman acting on a whim. He is a loner and has no contact with or compassion for the families who live on his island paradise. Judy Lovin had been a preschool teacher and befriends the island children. Through her warmth and caring, McFarland (the Beast) sees unselfish love modeled for the first time. As he begins to feel something for his Beauty, he becomes more possessive and more irrational in his actions towards her. When she begs to go home for her brother's wedding, he refuses but gives her a magnificent diamond bracelet to which she replies: "Did you want to prove that my shackles are indeed jewel-encrusted? You needn't have bothered, John. I've always known that" (155). Beauty has seen the walls to her paradise cage and mourns for her freedom.

When she does finally return to New York City, she faces her love for McFarland and returns in two weeks, ("That's about thirteen days too long!" says Sam, the old stable master), only to be rejected by McFarland: "Judy, there's someone better for you in New York. Some man who will give you the kind of life you deserve. Some man your father will approve of. He's right—I am a beast" (187). But love prevails and McFarland admits, " 'I live in a tropical paradise and it was winter without you'. . . From that moment, the islanders like to tell how the Beast was gone forever" (188).

In each of these contemporary versions, the Beast is a product of the corporate world. In each case, he has not had the



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gentle hand of a woman in his childhood. Therefore, Beauty must become the nurturing breast to instill an understanding for tenderness and compassion—not as a weakness, but as a desired vulnerability. When she has taught the Beast not only to accept love, but to give it, she has tamed him, and elements of that new humanity spill over into his corporate life and business dealings. Hunter helps Stacy's brother with organizational advice for his company. John McFarland builds a school and hospital on the island and quietly improves the Lovin industry. Rafe Santine hires world class genetic specialists and builds a clinic to improve the breeding of endangered species. The transformed Beast is Beauty's contribution to the world.

Kathryn, Beauty, in the current television series, feels a strong commitment to making the world a better place. She left her father's law firm to work for the underdog in the public sector. In this popularization of the *Beauty and the Beast* pattern, it is not a simple question of love and honor and commitment transforming the Beast. Even the long awaited kiss between Kathryn and Vincent did not make a difference. Beauty cannot turn her back on the "real world" to live with Vincent (the Beast) and the other inhabitants of a world below the New York City streets. Characterization is a bit more complex than in the original folktale. Yes, Vincent is a beast with a strong inborn sense of violence which he releases only in the most emotional and physically threatening scenes—but he has the soul of a poet. He is a prince of kindness, tolerance and understanding—but he is also a creature of darkness, a shadow figure. In New York City, there is an alternative to this Beast—men with pretty faces, college educations, and respected professions who walk in the sun, but whose facade cloaks the beast within, greed, immoral business dealings, shoddy workmanship, a lack of concern for humanity. This is Kathryn's world, her place to make a difference.

* * *

In the traditional tale and in the 20th century versions that emphasize the romance of the magic Beauty does not need to "tame" the Beast. The length of his enchantment seems to have done its work, and the Beast when Beauty meets him has his courtly side along with his beast nature. In the Cocteau and McKinley tales, the Beast is a man of intelligence and grace. Love only causes a physical transformation.

In the retellings of *Beauty and the Beast* written in the contemporary romance genre, there are no magic objects or invisible servants, but the major plot motifs of the original tale are preserved. Even though Beauty has a career of her own, she puts family or environmental values above personal success in the market place. She is willing to sacrifice for what she con-

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siders to be the greater good. As a by product of her modeling those values, she tames the Beast and the world is enriched. She becomes a fantasy super- being, glorifying traditional values *and* the new woman—wealthy, career oriented, married to a prince of power in a relationship that will have a happily-ever-after commitment of love, respect and trust. It may not be realistic, but it is an appealing feminine fantasy.

* * *

What will be the legacy of these 20th century retellings? The romantic leonine hero of the Cocteau film has already had an impact on the literary versions. McKinley's Beast, Vincent of the *Beauty and the Beast* television series, and Mercer Mayer's full color paintings in the 1978 picture book version—all follow his visual lead. Cocteau has done for the Beast what Bela Lugosi did for Nosferatu. He has become an attractive, suave, hero with a dark side.

However, it is a little harder to say what the impact of the popular romance novelization of the folktale will be. None of these volumes will have the opportunity to become a "classic" even if it had the literary stature. The nature of the genre is such that it does not become part of library collections, and the publishing company does not redistribute remaindered copies. While the powerful deep structure of the tale still appeals to the human psyche, the surface structure of these retellings is more a socio-political documentation of a contemporary world view.

Perhaps the legacy of these books is an altered concept of the role of the woman in the tale. No longer is she an innocent victim. Nor does she blindly remove a spell. Rather through her combination of traditional female virtues and her strength of character, she introduces the beast to his humanity—thus creating changes that are felt beyond the narrow castle/kingdom of old. He becomes a respected model of moral virtues in an immoral or amoral marketplace. When the context of the tale moves to the contemporary world and the notion of the beast turns from physical deformity to intellectual, emotional and moral consciousness, the threat of man's primitive animal nature gives way to a threat in the socio-political, economic and /or environmental arenas. A second element of this legacy may then be a stereotype of the corporate beast as a redeemable character.

The nature of ROMANCE in these contemporary novels includes the projection of a world made better through the pluck, steadfastness and virtue of the heroine. She does not fear engagement with the beast, rather she fears the consequences of a world in which the beast is allowed to roam free. She does not cage the beast, but rather she "tames" him by teaching him how to love and thereby reshaping his priorities.



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It is a testament to the enduring nature of the original *Beauty and the Beast* folktale that it can go through these temporal/cultural transformations with its identity intact, that it can still speak to its reader on a subconscious level about the duality of the nature of mankind and his role in the universe, and that it can evoke a strong emotional following in its readership. It will still be a viable vehicle for storytelling in the 21st century.

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